

VZCZCXRO4765
RR RUEHPT
DE RUEHBN #0097/01 2310108
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 190108Z AUG 09
FM AMCONSUL MELBOURNE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4993
INFO RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC
RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHINGTON DC
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 3636
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 0008
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 2128
RUEHPT/AMCONSUL PERTH 1609

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MELBOURNE 000097

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

White House for NSC Bader

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [SENV](#) [CASC](#) [AS](#)

SUBJECT: BUSHFIRE ROYAL COMMISSION INTERIM REPORT RELEASED

Ref: A) Melbourne 31, B) Melbourne 28, C) Melbourne 25, D) Melbourne 24, E) Melbourne 23, F) Melbourne 21, G) Melbourne 20, H) Melbourne 17, I) Canberra 134, J) Canberra 100

Summary

¶1. (SBU) A Royal Commission into the deadly February 7 wild fires which cost 173 lives released its interim report on August 17. We provide a snapshot of key recommendations. The Victorian government has informed post that it will likely ask for another U.S. wild fire liaison officer to facilitate future U.S. personnel deployments as the state gears up for another dry and hot fire season. End Summary.

Interim Report Released

¶2. (U) In response to the devastating wild fires which commenced on February 7 and cost 173 lives (reftels), a Royal Commission was launched to investigate the causes and to generate recommendations to prepare for future blazes. While the full findings of the report will not be available until July 2010, the Victorian government released an interim report on August 17 in order to prepare for the 2009-10 fire season which many expect to be just as difficult as the 2008-09 season.

Snapshot of Key Findings

¶3. (SBU) The complete interim report can be found online at: <http://www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Interim-Report>. Key recommendations include:

-- Warnings were insufficient both in timeliness and in method of delivery. Warning systems should be extended, simplified and use clear language.

-- Emergency telephone services were overwhelmed by call volumes, leading to serious failures. These systems' capacities should be increased.

-- Victoria's longstanding "stay and defend or leave early" policy was retained. The Commission placed emphasis on better explaining the costs (including death) and requirements involved in citizens defending their property. Emergency personnel should warn citizens that leaving early is the safest option and advise whether homes are defensible. The stay or go policy is highly controversial among fire experts, but the general consensus among fire officials in jurisdictions including Victoria and the Australian Capital

Territory (ACT) is that the policy is longstanding and appropriate if the public is well educated and warnings effectively implemented.

-- Existing facilities such as parking lots should be used for emergency refuge locations rather than purpose built structures.

-- Emergency legislation should be amended to clearly designate which state agency (Country Fire Authority or the Department of Sustainability and Environment) is responsible for warnings.

-- State agencies should be given direct responsibility for ensuring that staffing and equipment are commensurate with fire risks.

-- Regular contact between federal and state entities is recommended. (Comment: Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Bushfire Reconstruction Bill Shorten told us earlier this year that the Commonwealth has no interest in usurping state precedence in wild fire management. End Comment.)

US-Australia Wild Fire Cooperation

14. (SBU) U.S. wild fire assistance continues to be lauded at public events and remains a key source of goodwill. The Department of Foreign Affairs informed Canberra econoff on August 13 that legislative changes to the Foreign States Immunities Act of 1985 to allow the Attorney General to certify certain activities (like firefighting exchange) to enjoy a level of immunity equal to that provided by the U.S. is in train to be taken up this week in federal Parliament. We have no indication that these changes will not be

MELBOURNE 00000097 002 OF 002

passed quickly. Regardless of whether the bill passes, however, the Victorian government has informed us that they will likely ask for another U.S. liaison officer in the December-February 2009-10 period to facilitate the deployment of U.S. wild fire teams if needed.

Background on the Royal Commission

15. (U) A Royal Commission is an administrative inquiry which operates independent of the government. It has broad investigative powers, operates in a public setting and is not under an obligation to reach a definitive verdict. It is required to report on the nature of its inquiries, explaining the conclusions that were drawn from its investigations and its advice to the government. The Commission consulted with affected communities, received formal submissions and conducted public hearings.

Comment

16. (SBU) Nerves are still raw from Australia's deadliest natural disaster. Local papers are still running above the fold stories of affected families as the state rebuilds. The recommendations in the interim report are not surprising and many of them echo concerns expressed prior to the disaster by many experts. The stay or go policy is a longstanding and emotional issue for Victorians and it is not surprising that the Commission did not attempt to overturn it. The political cost of changing the policy would likely be significant but this could leave Australians vulnerable in the future. With a dry and hot season forecast this year, it will be a significant challenge for the Victorian and federal governments to adopt many of the recommendations in time. End Comment.

17. This is a collaborate cable with Embassy Canberra.

THURSTON